

Abstract 622

TITLE: Pharmacists' Syringe Sale Practices with Injection Drug Users in Atlanta, Georgia

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: The transmission of HIV and other blood-borne pathogens among injection drug users (IDUs), their sexual partners, and children results primarily from the sharing and re-use of blood-contaminated syringes. Many IDUs share and reuse syringes because of legal, regulatory and attitudinal barriers that restrict their access to sterile syringes from reliable sources such as pharmacies. This study sought to explore the salient factors influencing pharmacists' syringe sales to IDUs in Atlanta, Georgia.

METHODS: Twenty-nine qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted, 20 with metropolitan Atlanta pharmacists and 9 with pharmacy leaders in Georgia. Pharmacies were identified based upon ethnographic mapping conducted as part of an ongoing community identification process. Pharmacy leaders represented professional organizations and local policy makers.

RESULTS: Pharmacists reported that they use professional discretion in determining whether to sell syringes to a customer. A screening process, in which pharmacists ask for information such as an insulin prescription, knowledge about diabetes, or identification is often employed by pharmacists as a way to ascertain the legitimacy of the transaction. Most pharmacists were aware that there was some "rule" or "law" that bars the sale of syringes to persons injecting illegal drugs, however very few pharmacists were aware of the actual policy and the specific language. Many pharmacists reported a desire to sell syringes to IDUs to help prevent HIV transmission, however they presently failed to sell syringes to IDUs because of concerns regarding state "rules" and "laws" governing syringe sales. In addition, negative attitudes towards IDUs in general and syringe sales to them specifically were identified as important factors restricting such sales.

CONCLUSIONS: Efforts to improve IDUs' access to sterile syringes from pharmacies in Atlanta, GA must involve: (a) changing state laws and Board of Pharmacy regulations which pharmacists report as primary barriers to the sale of syringes to IDUs, and (b) educating pharmacists about the important role they can play in HIV prevention by selling sterile syringes to IDUs. Collaboration between pharmacy, public health, law enforcement, substance abuse treatment, and other groups is necessary to facilitate greater understanding of the public health importance of increasing IDUs access to sterile syringes from pharmacies.

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